



TEN THINGS YOU SHOULD NEVER SAY TO AN OVERWEIGHT CHILD

From *The Overweight Child* by Teresa Pitman and Miriam Kaufman, Firefly Books 2000, Buffalo, New York

1. You'd Be So Attractive if You Just Lost Some Weight

This comment (and many others like it, including “You’ve got such a pretty face!”) is often made with good intentions. The speaker hopes to boost the child’s confidence by making a positive comment about his or her appearance, and at the same time give a not-so-subtle encouragement to lose weight.

In fact, though, it is incredibly hurtful. The underlying message is, “but, of course, you’re not attractive now.” Young children have great difficulty in visualizing future changes and usually find it impossible to act on this statement the way the speaker intends. If the comment has been “You’ve got such a pretty face,” the child always hears the unspoken ending to the sentence: “too bad your body is so ugly.”

Overweight children are as beautiful and lovable as any other children. To hurt them with these half-hearted compliments can only damage their self-esteem.

2. If You Weren't So Greedy (or Lazy) You Wouldn't Be So Fat

The research makes it very clear that being overweight is not caused by “personality defects” such as greed or laziness. This comment is simply not true. Any child psychologist will tell you, though, that these kinds of statements tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. The child who is told often enough that he or she is greedy or lazy often internalizes that comment and begins to believe it – and to behave that way.

What do we mean by “greedy” anyway? Is it a crime to enjoy food, as many children – including, of course, many overweight children – do? Many parents with picky eaters wish their children would have a little more enthusiasm about their mealtimes. And what is “lazy”? Yes, many

overweight children would benefit from increasing their physical activity level. So would many thinner children. But most of them aren't lazy – they are simply putting their energy and interest into other areas (perhaps computers, books or television).

Comments like this add layers of hurt. Not only does the child have to deal with the social stigma of being overweight, but now he is accused of greed and laziness as well.

3. No Dessert for You, You've Already Had Enough

This kind of comment is dangerous in several ways. First, it makes the dessert a special, forbidden treat, which naturally becomes more attractive to the child. Anything a child is told he can't have becomes very desirable. He may decide to swipe some later after everyone else has left the kitchen or sneak down in the middle of the night for a treat.

If other people in the family are eating the dessert, the child is placed in a very painful situation. He's being punished for being overweight and being forced to endure watching the others enjoy something he can't have. Can you imagine handing your cigarettes to a group of friends while telling the smoker who is trying to quit that he can't have one? The child's natural reaction tends to be anger and resentment, and often, again, a determination to steal or somehow acquire the food that was forbidden.

Finally, by making the decision that the child has had enough, you are stopping her from listening to her own body. She needs to let her body signal her when it's full and as long as you tell her, "No, you've had enough," she won't be listening to her inner cues. Then how will she know when to stop eating when you're not there? It's better to ask, "Are you still hungry?" and let her respond depending on her body's signals.

If this is an ongoing problem in your family, you may need to change your approach to dessert. Try planning fruit or pudding-based desserts that are low in fat and high in nutrients, so they become a valuable part of the meal. Then everyone can enjoy them without any concerns. If you do choose to serve a rich dessert, it should be offered to everyone, and perhaps the rest of the meal could be kept fairly light (a main-dish salad, for example) to compensate.

4. If you Lost Some Weight the Other Kids Wouldn't Tease You So Much

If that were true, only overweight children would be teased. In fact, kids that are always finding something to tease other kids about, whether it's wearing glasses, haircuts, clothes, stuttering, doing unusually well or badly in school, and on and on. Yes, overweight children are often teased by other kids, but you need to make it very clear that this is not the overweight child's fault. She does not deserve teasing and humiliation because of her size (which is what the comment above seems to imply). Would you tell a child who wore glasses that if he'd improve his eyesight he wouldn't be teased?

If teasing is a serious problem for your child, this might be a good time to approach a teacher at school about helping children learn better social skills. It is never appropriate to make fun of another person's body, whether it is because they are skinny, disabled in some way, a different race or overweight. Our society's bias against large-size people is so strong that children are often permitted to say these things in front of teachers and other adults when we would stop them immediately if their comments were racist or directed at disabled people. Overweight children deserve just as much consideration.

5. You Probably Wouldn't Have Hurt Your Leg (Pulled a Muscle, Sprained an Ankle, Twisted a Knee) If You Weren't Overweight

Is this true? Possibly. There is some evidence that overweight children are at slightly more risk of injury during activity, although it may be caused by their inexperience in sports rather than their weight. But it's also true that many thin people are injured during activities from sports to shoveling the driveway after a snowstorm.

Even more important, you need to look at the likely effects of this comment. Your child is probably not going to think, "Yes, Mom's right, I should lose weight somehow so that I'll be less likely to get injured playing sports." Instead, his reaction will more likely be: "Fine, I won't play baseball [or soccer or whatever the activity was at the time he was injured] ever again." Instead of promoting health and fitness, this kind of statement actually encourages him to become less active.

The overweight child who is injured while playing sports or engaged in any

activity needs the same reassurance and support that any other athlete would get. Help her learn the skills she needs to play safely and reduce the risk of injury, but don't link it to her weight.

6. I Don't Think Light Colors Are a Good Choice for You – How about This Nice Dark Brown Dress?

If your child likes the dark brown dress, there's nothing wrong with that choice. But if your child prefers the bright red or the light green, let her express her tastes in her clothing.

Too often overweight children are encouraged to stay in the background of life, and dressing them in dull dark clothes is one way of trying to make them less noticeable. Some shy children would prefer that anyway, but other children, whether they are larger than average or not, want to be center stage, and dressing bright can be part of that. Respecting their choices is very important.

These arguments over clothes can often be a reflection of the parent's discomfort with the child's size. You are choosing dark clothes because you want him to seem smaller. But it's much more important that he feels comfortable with his body – and if a bright red sweater make him feel cheerful and powerful (even though you feel it draws too much attention to his plump figure), then it may be very valuable to his self-esteem for you to let him wear it.

7. Only Thin Kids Can Do Gymnastics (or Ballet). Why Don't You Sign Up for Piano Lessons Instead?

There's nothing wrong with piano lessons. But if your child is interested in gymnastics, dancing, swimming or any other activity that's traditionally associated with thinner people, please don't discourage her.

Too many adults have the idea that only thin and talented are entitled to dance or play sports. Most children haven't discovered that concept yet, and the longer we can keep them from believing in it, the better.

Sometimes parents say this to protect their child from future hurts. If Charles signs up for ballet, they worry, he'll be teased by the other children and end up feeling worse. Yes, teasing is a concern for overweight children – but he might just as easily be teased by the other kids at his piano lesson. He may, instead, find a new group of friends linked by a common interest in

dancing that overrides their difference in body shape and size.

In other cases, the parents are concerned about their own embarrassment. They cringe at the thought of watching chubby Jessica running across the gym floor or swinging from the bar in a tight leotard, or seeing Derek's round tummy over the top of his swimming trunks. Those feelings are the result of the indoctrination we've received about how "disgusting" it is to be heavier than the average, and they can be very destructive for parents with overweight children. Some parents have to work very hard to overcome this feeling and be able to watch their overweight child walk across the beach in a bathing suit and not feel uncomfortable about how he or she looks.

We know how important exercise and activity are in everyone's life and any involvement your child has is a positive thing, even if you think the sport is not entirely suitable. Try instead to respond in a positive way: "I think it's great that you're interested in gymnastics. Let's see if you can try a few classes to see if you like it."

8. After You Lose Weight, We'll Go on a Holiday (or Buy You a New Bike or Any Other Reward)

Setting up weight loss as a goal for a child is a terrible mistake. First of all, children should seek to maintain their weight until they grow into it, rather than actually losing pounds. If the reward is desirable enough, you may find the child embarking on a dangerous low-calorie diet that can damage her health and start her on the road to a lifelong struggle with weight. Even then, she may not be able to achieve the goal you have set for her (read our chapter on the causes of overweight to understand why).

This approach also starts a pattern that can be difficult to break. Far too many overweight adults put their lives on hold "until they lose weight." How many people have you heard say, "When I lose weight, I'll buy some new clothes." "When I lose weight, I'll join that club I've always wanted to be part of." "When I lose weight, I'll take that vacation to Florida." Time goes by, the weight stays the same and the person has missed out on a great many things she really wanted to do.

If you follow the tips in this book and your child becomes fitter and healthier, that will be reward enough. As you are making these changes in your family's lifestyle, encourage your child to do things he likes. He deserves to enjoy life! If he himself suggests, "I'll do that after I lose weight," try to encourage him to do it now.

9. If You Want to Lose Weight, You're Just Going to Have to Stay Hungry Most of the Time

Reread the earlier comments – children should not lose weight but stabilize until they grow into it.

Staying hungry, though, is never a good plan for weight management. When you are hungry, your body responds in several ways. It sends increasingly strong signals to let you know that it needs food (signals that are especially hard for a child to ignore). Even more importantly, it slows down your metabolism to use any food you take in more efficiently. Overweight children generally have fairly slow metabolisms to start with; low-calorie diets simply slow them down even more. While they may, in fact, lose some weight this way, it is quickly regained.

Children who are hungry most of the time tend to become completely focused on food. They think about it all the time and they are more likely to give up and binge on their favorite treats.

Instead, encourage your child to eat a healthy, low-fat diet with the emphasis on carbohydrates, fruits and vegetables, and to eat enough that he feels comfortably full. Help him to recognize his body's cues that tell him when to stop eating. If he's still hungry, he should eat more – but he should choose his foods from the low-fat items mentioned earlier.

This gradual moving toward healthier eating will help your child find the most appropriate weight for her body and maintain that weight.

10. Your Problem Is That You Just Don't Have Any Willpower

Your overweight child has just as much willpower as anyone else (or just as little as anyone else!). As we have discussed elsewhere in the book, weight is much more complicated than simply a lack of willpower. Again, these comments tend to be self-fulfilling prophecies. The child quickly becomes convinced that he doesn't have any willpower that he's likely to give in to any temptation (including, perhaps, drugs and alcohol) and since no one offers any suggestions on how to increase willpower, he follows the expected pattern. When high-fat treats are offered, he takes several – what else would you expect from a person with no willpower?

In fact, the heaviest people are likely to be those with the most willpower –

the people who have dieted, lost weight, regained it, dieted again, regained the weight, dieted again and so on. Their metabolism is now so slow that they must eat very few calories just to keep from gaining even more. This cycle is very difficult to break out of once it has been established.

What if your family has been working on changing your eating patterns and then you find your child has pigged out on right chocolate ice cream? Don't condemn him for his lack of willpower. This is a good time to talk about tastes and to discuss how difficult it is to keep to a healthy diet when so many high-fat foods are around. You might try to buy a lower-fat substitute for the food that tempts him the most strongly. Reassure him that occasional binges or overindulgences in treats are not failures or reasons to give altogether.

Suggesting that a child has no willpower is the result of believing another of the myths about body size: that being overweight is somehow the result of a moral deficiency. It isn't. a person's character and worth as a human being are not related to body size. It is more important for your child to grow into an adult who can recognize his innate worth and value his strengths than for him to grow up as a thin person.